

The Relevance of Black Consciousness Today



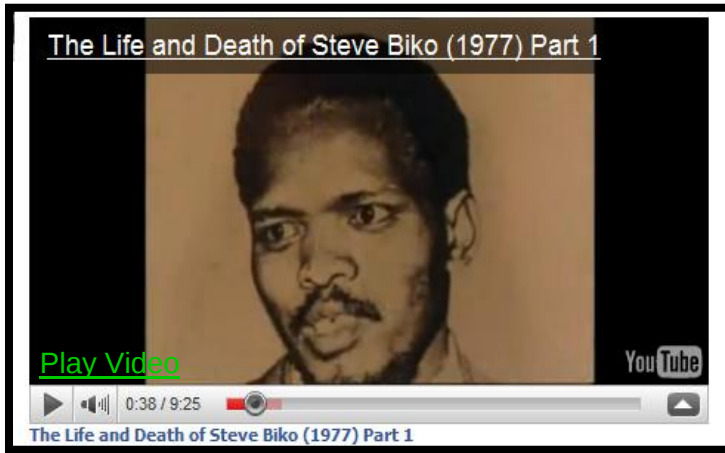
**THE MOST
POTENT
WEAPON IN
THE HAND
OF THE
OPPRESSOR
IS THE MIND
OF THE
OPPRESSED.**



**S T E P H E N
BIKO**

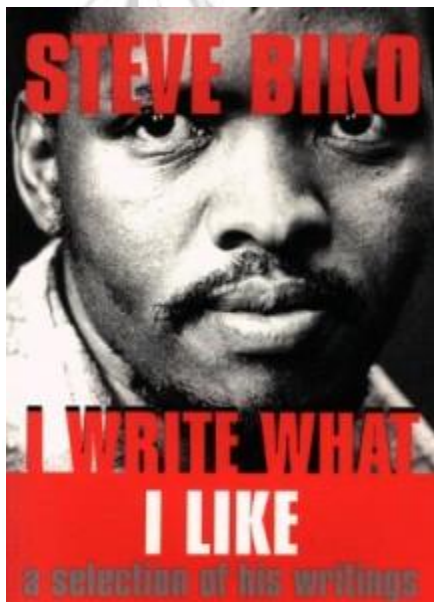
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The relevance of Black Consciousness today

April 17, 2010 by [Peter Kenworthy](#) [Leave a Comment](#)



To truly be able to determine whether Black Consciousness is relevant today, an analysis of the way South Africa has fared under the ANC's administration is necessary, something that is outside the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it is possible to suggest some overarching areas in which Black Consciousness can still inform or develop present day South Africa.

[Steve Biko](#), by pointing out that any "change in color of the occupier does not necessarily change the system" and thus that true liberation requires social change, is alluding to the same neo-colonial tendencies that Fanon warned of. The relevance of Black Consciousness in a social context is therefore to be judged on whether South Africa has achieved real social change, as well as on the quality of Black

Consciousness' social and political alternatives to the present-day policies of the ANC.

According to [Mamphela Ramphele](#), although Biko "would be proud of what South Africa has been able to achieve ... he would be saddened by where we have fallen short: ... in

the area of tackling HIV/Aids, [and] in the area of tackling the inequalities in our society". Another area in which Black Consciousness is seemingly still relevant is in that of self-worth. Black Consciousness argued that blacks were killing and destroying themselves by proxy, in other words blaming themselves for their misery, not their oppressors, and that all South Africans needed to be freed from the conditioning of apartheid. When [Barney Pityana](#) now claims that there is a "major breakdown of [contemporary South African] society" where too many have "lost that essence of humanity", he is simultaneously claiming that such reclaiming of humanity and de-conditioning has not been achieved.

Black Consciousness is furthermore relevant because it confronts what Works calls a "central paradox facing contemporary South African society: that of endorsing cultural differences while embracing a cohesive national culture". According to Works, "Biko claimed that the paradox could only be solved if national bodies were unitary, not divided by race", whereas the ANC has historically continued to define South Africa along ethnical lines, embracing their own particular brand of multiracialism or multiculturalism.^[1]

An additional problem is that of a culturally embedded capitalism and its global extension globalisation that some see as having colonial or neo-colonial connotations and as being detrimental to Africa's development. The question is whether present day ANC claims that capitalism is the only viable system helps consolidate its hegemonic status and consequently Western imperialism, and whether African elites are accordingly simply conveyor belts for Western capitalism? In attempting to suggest a different path than that of capitalism, Black Consciousness is interesting, if for no other reason than by challenging the intellectual hegemony of capitalism, a new understanding of capitalist society that shows some of its morally objectionable aspects can be found that goes beyond realism's "self-fulfilling prophecy of doom". Understanding and challenging society is after all the first step towards changing it.

Finally, the fact that Black Consciousness establishes that the material as well as the cultural and psychological wrongs of colonialism/apartheid is to be eradicated makes it an integral approach to solving South Africa's problems that encompasses the non-economic, psychological solutions as well as the economic. Until now mostly non-integrated change has been sought,^[2] but according to Fromm "one cannot separate the change in our industrial and political organization from that of the structure of our educational and cultural life", because "no serious attempt for change and reconstruction will succeed if it is not undertaken in all those spheres simultaneously". That the ANC government has mainly dealt with redressing the material legacy of apartheid through programmes such as [Black Economic Empowerment](#) (BEE), and that even this has been done in an un-integral way, means that it fails to deal with the fundamental negative psychological legacies of apartheid.

^[1] Group rights were advocated as early as 1948 by the ANC and the Freedom Charter has a clause stating, "all national groups should enjoy equal rights". Mbeki's definition of

such group rights was to equate them with ethnic groups. Furthermore, the “right of self-determination of any community sharing a common cultural and language heritage, within a territorial entity in the Republic or in any other way” stated in section 235 in the South African Constitution is equally focused on securing group rights.

[2] By for instance dissociating crime from poverty or psychological complexes, or privatisation of South Africa’s water systems, and the subsequent increased prices of water, from health issues. The 2001 cholera outbreak, where people had to drink cholera-infected water because they could not afford to buy water, is an example of such interconnectedness.

